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Webster to Be Questioned About Meese's Inquiry

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WASHINGTON, March 31 — The chairman and vice chairman of the Senate intelligence committee said today that they planned to raise detailed questions about Attorney General Edwin Meese 3d's handling of the Iran-contra affair at hearings next month on the nomination of William H. Webster to be Director of Central Intelligence.

The questioning will focus on the events of last November when Mr. Meese directed an inquiry that uncovered the diversion of profits from the sale of American arms to Iran to the rebels fighting the Marxist leaders of

Nicaragua. The two Senators said the committee wanted to ask Mr. Webster, the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, why he agreed to keep bureau agents out of the initial inquiry.

According to Mr. Meese's sworn Congressional testimony, he and Mr. Webster concluded that there was no reason to open a criminal investigation of the Iran arms dealing. That conversation between Mr. Meese and Mr. Webster took place just three weeks after the F.B.I. acceded to the Attorney General's request to delay a criminal inquiry into an air freight company linked to the contras. Mr. Meese has said he was told by the National Security Council that the company, Southern Air Transport, was involved in the efforts to free the American hostages held in Lebanon.

'It Would Not Be Appropriate'

The report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence quotes Mr. Meese as having testifying that he and Mr. Webster agreed that, "as there was no criminal matter involved, it would not be appropriate to bring in the F.B.I."

Several weeks later, at a breakfast meeting with reporters, Mr. Webster recalled that it was Mr. Meese who said he knew of "nothing criminal" in

the Iran dealings and that he then responded, "On what I know, I don't either."

Senator David L. Boren, Democrat of Oklahoma, the chairman of the committee, and Senator William S. Cohen, Republican of Maine, the vice chairman, said they plan to question Mr. Webster about this exchange and whether the information provided by the Attorney General was incomplete or misleading in any way.

The committee is planning to publicly release portions of Mr. Meese's testimony, given at a closed session of the intelligence committee last year, on the eve of Mr. Webster's confirmation hearings.

Federal law-enforcement officials said that Mr. Webster has recently told associates of his regard for the Attorney General and his belief that Mr. Meese did not mislead him in the early stages of the Iran arms investigation.

The officials said, however, that Mr. Webster may raise questions about the quality of some advice given to Mr. Meese by Justice Department aides.

Senator Boren said the committee would send Mr. Webster written questions about the conversation, on Nov. 21, and the delayed investigation of Southern Air Transport. The panel plans to take public testimony at hearings as soon as next month, he said.

Senator Cohen vice chairman, said the issues relating to Mr. Meese were "legitimate questions" that should be thoroughly examined at the public hearings.

Inquiry Drew Criticism

Mr. Meese was sharply criticized by

some law-enforcement officials and senior members of Congress for his performance in his preliminary inquiry over the weekend of Nov. 21. Bureau agents were not brought into the case to seal files, as is the normal practice in criminal cases, until five days later. Federal investigators working on the criminal investigation supervised by a special prosecutor now suspect that key officials were able to destroy records and evidence.

The conversation between Mr. Webster and Mr. Meese on Nov. 21 came one day after the bureau had been given permission to renew its investigation of Southern Air Transport.

The air freight company came under scrutiny after the Nicaragua shot down an American-built cargo plane on Oct. 5.